

# Work-based and vocational education as catalysts for sustainable development?

## A louder call

Over a decade ago, the United Nations' established the Principles of Responsible Management Education (PRME) initiative to prompt a radical overhaul of how responsibility, ethics and sustainability are treated in higher education, particularly in relation to the business, management and organisation studies fields (Wall, 2017). By 2017, although there are now a range of radical responses available (Akrivou and Bradbury-Huang, 2015; Wall and Jarvis, 2015; Wall, 2016; Wall, Bellamy, Evans, Hopkins, 2017; Wall, Hindley, Hunt, Peach, Preston, Hartley and Fairbank, 2017; Wall, Russell, Moore, 2017; Wall, Clough, Österlind, Hindley, 2018), evidence suggests that little has changed on a global or even national scale (Wall, Hindley, Hunt, Peach, Preston, Hartley and Fairbank, 2017), and there remain urgent calls at the highest levels of the United Nations for higher education to help promote responsibility, ethics and sustainability in education (UNESCO, 2016; Wall, 2018).

At the same time, evidence also suggests that forms of work-based and vocational education can have transformative impacts in relation to working towards some of the Sustainable Development Goals, such as climate literacy and reduced inequalities (Wall, Hindley, Hunt, Peach, Preston, Hartley and Fairbank, 2017; Wall and Meakin, 2018; Wall and Hindley, 2018). As such, the original intention of this special issue was to collate a range of papers from the diverse contexts and forms of work-based and vocational education to help review the progress we are making towards the Sustainable Development Goals and to pinpoint future possibilities. The original call identified a range of suggestions including topics such as:

- how to integrate responsibility, ethics and sustainability into work-based higher and/or vocational forms of education or reflective practices;
- infusing responsibility, ethics and sustainability into reflective practices;
- innovative pedagogies of work-based learning which promote humanistic and holistic forms of learning, or which promote the interrelatedness of humans to other people and/or the planet;
- the challenges, tensions, dilemmas or integrating responsibility, ethics and sustainability into work-based higher and/or vocational forms of education or reflective practices; and
- how work-based learning can stimulate changes within educational or other organisational settings, or facilitate transformational change.

Yet the call also suggested an alternative focus in on specific dimensions of responsibility, ethics and sustainability, and pointed to the United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals in the context of work-based learning or vocational education (Wall, 2018). The 17 goals (which collectively house the 169 global targets) are:

1. End poverty in all its forms everywhere.
2. End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition.
3. Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all, at all ages.
4. Ensure equitable education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.
5. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.
6. Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all.
7. Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy for all.
8. Promote sustained and inclusive employment, and decent work for all.
9. Build resilient infrastructure and foster innovation.

10. Reduce inequality within and among countries.
11. Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.
12. Ensure responsible and sustainable production and consumption.
13. Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts.
14. Conserve the oceans, seas and marine resources.
15. Protect and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems (including biodiversity).
16. Promote peaceful and inclusive societies and accountable institutions.
17. Strengthen the means of implementation through global partnerships.

### A louder, polyphonic response

We hope that you agree that the papers in this special issue lived up to the ambitious focus of the special issue, and that they have done so in ways which reflect some of the key principles which are themselves relevant to sustainability. One of these principles is about the need to work across the boundaries of disciplines, sub-disciplines or organisational structures; we know that one perspective only ever produces limited insights. Indeed, some might even suggest that the narrow singular view is the reason we now need the notion of sustainable development in the first place, and that this is why we need the 17 Sustainable Development Goals and 169 targets on a global scale. For example, within this special issue, we can see that the papers cross a number of different conceptual and practical boundaries:

- crossing country-level policy (Rosenberg *et al.*), policy-in-practice (Hardwick-Franco), ideational (Castro-Spila *et al.*), critical (Crawford-Lee and Wall), digital (Katernyak *et al.*), pedagogical embedding (Diver *et al.*), and pedagogical rebalancing (Österlind);
- crossing cultural and country boundaries including the UK (Crawford-Lee and Wall, and Mburayi and Wall), South Africa (Rosenberg *et al.*), Sweden (Österlind), Ukraine (Katernyak *et al.*), and Spain (Castro-Spila *et al.*); and
- crossing subject boundaries including the subjects of governance and policy (Crawford-Lee and Wall, and Rosenberg *et al.*), accounting and finance (Mburayi and Wall), tourism (Castro-Spila *et al.*), law and legal (Diver *et al.*), and drama/education (Österlind).

Each of the papers are now outlined. The first of the eight papers in this special issue is Crawford-Lee and Wall's (2018) "Sustainability 2030: a policy perspective from the University Vocational Awards Council". This paper is the first position paper from the University Vocational Awards Council (this journal's primary sponsor) which explicitly comments on and critiques policy from the perspective of sustainable development and the Sustainable Development Goals. It takes its lead from a policy critique published in this journal last year (Wall, 2017), and raises a number of important issues which should frame research and practice development for the coming policy period. As Crawford-Lee and Wall articulate, "This paper argues for a greater integration of sustainable development into higher education, skills and work-based learning policy and practice, and specifically in relation to (1) creating inclusive workplaces, (2) promoting social mobility, (3) a balanced approach to productivity, health and well-being, and (4) embedding educational approaches and methods which promote inequality in workplaces". Its remit, therefore, goes beyond pedagogical and includes how we design and construct workplaces which directly effects how we engage with the sustainable development agenda.

The second paper, from South Africa, is especially pertinent in the wake of the water shortages in Cape Town in 2018. Here, Rosenberg *et al.*'s (2018) "The Green Economy Learning Assessment South Africa: insights for higher education, skills and work-based learning" comments on some of the urgent and radical transformations that are needed in the

African context (where social justice is of a particular interest), and the implications for HESWBL practitioners and researchers. Rosenberg *et al.* find a range of “competencies required to drive sustainability [...] were clustered as technical, relational and transformational competencies for: making the case; integrated sustainable development planning; strategic adaptive management and expansive learning; working across organisational units; working across knowledge fields; capacity and organisational development; and principle-based leadership”. Such competences, argue Rosenberg *et al.* can realistically be developed through a combination of higher education courses, short courses, and workplace learning.

In the next paper, “Flexible education in Australia: a reflection from the perspective of the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals”, Hardwick-Franco (2018) reflects on a policy innovation in Australia through the lens of the Sustainable Development Goals. Here, she explores “the extent to which the South Australian flexible learning option (FLO) secondary school enrolment strategy supports some of the most vulnerable and disengaged students to simultaneously engage in secondary- and higher-education, skills and work-based learning”. The FLO seemingly provides a wider gaze over educational levels and enables younger people greater decision-making powers in their educational, personal and professional development. To support an earlier critique (Wall, 2017), and issues raised in this special issue’s first paper (Crawford-Lee and Wall, 2018), Hardwick-Franco’s paper prompts us to question the extent to which HESWBL contexts and practitioners are engaging in this wider gaze, and are developing provision which might be suitable for such vulnerable groups.

Next, Castro-Spila *et al.*’s (2018) “Social Innovation and Sustainable Tourism Lab: An explorative model” offers a fascinating approach to research and development as well as the call of this special issue. Here, the authors adopt a “method of agile research [...] involv[ing] the creation of successive and accumulative prototypes of four kinds: a) conceptual, b) relational, c) functional and d) transferable”, which allows the integration of multiple perspectives in the context of responsible tourism. Through their approach, Castro-Spila *et al.* were able to develop an approach to work-based learning which integrated “a) The development of a mapping process on tourism vulnerabilities (linked to opportunities for social innovation); b) The development of experimental training in prototyping social innovations on sustainable tourism; c) The design of hybrid social innovation business models linked to sustainable tourism; and d) The development of a relational model of evaluation linking together social innovation competencies with processes of transition towards sustainable tourism”. Their agile approach to a sustainability-infused research and development process has significant implications for others in the field of HESWBL, and directly responds to some of ongoing concerns within the field (Wall, 2017).

In “Sustainability in the professional accounting and finance curriculum: an exploration”, Mburayi and Wall (2018) synthesise the literature related to how sustainability is integrated into a professionally oriented curriculum which is typically considered the antithesis of sustainability. As the authors recognise, the prioritising of economic and monetary value over other forms continues to be a key challenge in sustainability transformations on a global scale (Wall and Jarvis, 2015; Wall, 2018), and so the focus on accounting and finance education seems to be a strategic and urgent target for development. Here, the authors utilise a systematic review methodology to find that “accounting and finance lags behind other management disciplines in embedding sustainability” and so call for “practitioners and researchers alike to explore new ways of integrating sustainability in the accounting and finance curricula, including working across boundaries to provide

learning opportunities for future accountants, financial managers, and generalist managers”. It seems that tackling sustainability in this professional curriculum area has an important role in moving to a more sustainable future.

The next paper, [Katernyak \*et al.\*'s \(2018\)](#) “eLearning within the community of practice for sustainable development”, explains an approach to facilitating national-level culture change with respect to project managers in public organisations in the Ukraine. Here, the authors were particularly interested in facilitating changes in relation to national sustainable development priorities, that is, “equitable social development, sustainable economic growth and employment, efficient governance, environmental balance and the development of resilience”. One of the interesting insights from this paper is the approach adopted and tailored by the authors, that is, the “4A” model in the design of their development programme, where the pedagogical architects focus on “1. Attention to CoP’s needs, 2. Actualization by e-course goals and objectives, 3. Attraction by required new knowledge and skills, 4. Action by demonstrating their performance and skills”. Such a model might inform other HESWBL practitioners in their own instructional design activity, including but not limited to the context of building competence in sustainable development.

In “Clients, Clinics and Social Justice: Reducing Inequality (and embedding legal ethics) via an LLB portfolio pathway”, [Collinson \*et al.\* \(2018\)](#) discuss their innovative practice within another professionally oriented curricula. Although the development of portfolios and learning ethics are not new in the context of law and legal education, when placed across a curriculum together, they can create new learning opportunities in addition to challenges and insights. Here, work-based learning students eventually become involved in advising the public in complex legal matters and their “learning gains” are evidenced via three substantial portfolios of practical, work-based learning tasks (i.e. legal research presentations, skeleton arguments, moots, legal opinion, legal advice) which have at their core a need to reinforce the importance of adhering to professional, ethical principles and codes of behaviour”. In this way, [Diver \*et al.\*](#) have seemingly found ways to manage the risks involved in enabling students to offer complex legal advice, and in doing so, also tackle some of the inequalities and social injustices in accessing such legal advice.

The final paper is “Drama in higher education for sustainability: work-based learning through fiction?” Here, [Österlind \(2018\)](#) discusses another professionally oriented curricula for in-service teachers (although by no means limited to such professionals), and offers us two fresh insights. First, she provides a stark reminder that although this journal is mostly concerned with learning in the workplace, there are circumstances where taking professional learners out of the workplace provides a safer space to explore, experiment, engage in serious play, and then decide action steps. This is particularly relevant to the difficult knowledge that education for sustainable development deals with (Wall, Giles and Stanton, 2018). And second, but related to this first point, is that Österlind highlights the role and potential of *drama* and the dramatic traditions to create these safe and experimental spaces to help people explore difficult knowledge. The “turn to arts” is an increasing movement in many policy and practice spheres including professional learning and innovation in practice ([Päsilä \*et al.\*, 2017](#); [Wall, Clough, Österlind, Hindley, 2018](#); [Wall, Österlind, and Fries, 2018](#)).

In addition to analysing what is included in this special issue, it is also interesting to reflect on what is not included or which is not present ([Wall, 2016](#)). Interestingly the special issue attracted a number of papers in the broad sphere of health and well-being, particularly in the

context of higher education as a workplace. Although these papers presented some fascinating and exciting content, ironically, the operational demands of those workplaces became too strong and such papers did not make this special issue. Yet maybe it is also an indicator of the extent we build in sustainable development into the thinking, practice and research in the sphere of practice which constitutes HESWBL. In a similar piece of research with a professional group, one recent research questioned the extent to which sustainable development appears on the register of practitioners in that sphere:

But do we notice aspects of consumption, such as the tonnes of pollution from such frequent flying and driving? Do we notice the amount of plastic being used, generated or wasted by the products being developed by your clients? Do we notice the forms of “excess” in their (and our own) life and work which might go to feed or sustain other communities who are less fortunate? Or are these “taboos”, kept hidden out of reach of [...] practice?

(Wall, Hawley, Iordanou, Csigás, Cumberland, Lerotic-Pavlik, and Vreede, 2018, p. 18).

There is a building critique – of which this special issue contributes – to this very point, and asks a number of important questions (Sun and Kang, 2015): Is it that the HESWBL agenda is too focussed on delivering the immediately relevant demands of employers and employees to expand the gaze to wider and longer term thinking? Are strategic policy turbulences taking our anxieties and energies? What are we doing in our client driven employer driven spaces to make a difference? Should not we be doing a lot more? Or do we have to wait for more dramatic transformational events to happen for us to shift our attention to sustainable development more closely (Wall, Hawley, Iordanou, Csigás, Cumberland, Lerotic-Pavlik, and Vreede, 2018)? What might these be?

Perhaps as a field one of the things we can do immediately is to join and add our own momentum to the United Nations’ PRME initiative? There are now many international networks hosted and fuelled by:

15 regional PRME Chapters help to advance [PRME] within a particular geographic context, rooting PRME in different national, regional, cultural and linguistic landscapes. Chapters have their own governance, and align themselves with their respective Global Compact Local Networks to collaborate on a variety of locally-adapted programs and projects.

PRME Working Groups – 7 issue-area collaborations of faculty, industry experts, business leaders and students explore a range of topics and their implications for responsible management education. PRME Working Groups produce cutting-edge research into important topics that permeate higher education, with some participants authoring feature publications and books.

PRME Champions – a select group of high-performing institutions that have radically transformed their curricula and research [...] They offer case studies of the challenges and opportunities of embracing institutional transformation, and provide a roadmap for other signatories to follow

([www.unprme.org/how-to-engage/index.php](http://www.unprme.org/how-to-engage/index.php)).

Or, as a field, can we join and add our momentum to another initiative that has developed: the Inter-University Sustainable Development Research Programme (IUSDRP), an international network promoting research in this area. IUSDRP is a lively network which aims to:



[...] establish a platform, on which member universities may undertake more research on matters related to sustainable development, according to an agreed work plan and agenda [...] The Inter-University Sustainable Development Research Programme will ensure that energetic, committed experts at member universities have a sound basis upon which they can attract and undertake research projects, train PhD students, publish more in indexed journals, and organize high caliber events, working more closely with their peers (a clear requirement in the sustainable development research community) and hence strengthening their personal and institutional profiles

([www.haw-hamburg.de/en/ftz-nk/programmes/iusdrp/aims.html](http://www.haw-hamburg.de/en/ftz-nk/programmes/iusdrp/aims.html)).

Whichever we decide to choose, this special issue is a dedication to many of the HESWBL researchers and practitioners who hold sustainable development very close to their head, heart, and practice.

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## Further reading

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